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ARTICLE

Grave Police Music: On Bill Griffiths

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This essay takes the publication of Bill Griffiths' *Collected Poems* as an opportunity to look again at his poems about prison. While sequences like *Cycles* and *War W/Windsor* have long been acknowledged as highpoints of the so-called British Poetry Revival, the broader social context of their composition has been overlooked. I link Griffiths' work in the 1970s with mass protests in English prisons, and the activism of Preservation of the Rights of Prisoners (PROP). I suggest that the uncollected sequence *An Account of the End* signals a break in Griffiths' work, and pick up the thread again in the early 1990s. I argue for the importance of an essay, *HMP: Revising Prison*, a poem, *Star Fish Jail*, and a hybrid work of journals and letters, *76-Day Wanno*. These works, written in the wake of the Strangeways prison riot, combine prison activism with aesthetic experimentation. The essay combines archival sources, close textual scholarship, and historical investigation.

Keywords: Bill Griffiths; Prison writing; PROP; British Poetry Revival

Hey poet! are you much of a teacher?

I teach myself – not you.¹

Over the past ten years, the work of Bill Griffiths has received steady – if not always sustained – critical attention. Readers have benefited from *The Salt Companion to Bill Griffiths* (2007); a special issue of the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* (2014); and most recently a three-volume *Collected Poems* (2010, 2014, 2016). The latter, lovingly edited by Alan Halsey, brings a substantial amount of the poetry back into print, and allows perhaps for the first time a comprehensive chronological overview. But Griffiths remains unwieldy. His literary production from the early 1970s until his death in 2007 was relentless. The *Collected Poems*, which stops in 1996, still runs to more than 1200 pages. In addition to poetry, Griffiths compiled

dictionaries of the language of the Northeast of England; wrote pamphlets of local history, ghosts stories, political tracts, and satires; and translated and prepared scholarly editions of Old English texts. He was also an archivist, cataloguing the papers of his friend and sometime-mentor Eric Mottram at King's College London (KCL), and the Northern Sinfonia at Northumbria University. For the reader and the researcher, the result of this boundless productivity can sometimes feel overwhelming. It's hard to know where to begin, and harder to find an ending: even in the more definitive form of the *Collected* the sequences blur into one another, the result of a lifelong process of thought and rethinking.

I have come to think of this material as a kind of labyrinth, and the guides to navigation full of their own puzzles and secrets. Readers with different interests will each find their own thread, but these threads tangle and overlap, and start to pull in different directions. But for as long as he was writing poetry, Bill Griffiths wrote about prison, prisoners, and the law. This is the thread I will attempt to follow here. I aim to do three things: 1) Provide some brief historical context for Griffiths' work on prisons; 2) Give a reading of three texts from the early 1990s, including an essay, a poem, and a hybrid book of letters and journals; and 3) Reflect on the difficulties Griffiths' poetry poses to the critic. I will begin with a letter.

In November 1993, Tony Blair wrote to Bill Griffiths thanking him for a copy of his essay 'on the difficulties of prison life', promising to study it closely.² Blair's letterhead gives his address as Myrobella House at Trimdon Colliery, about 15 miles south of 21 Alfred Street, Seaham, on the North–East coast, where Griffiths had moved on Mayday 1990. Though this move was dictated by economic necessity, it was also a gesture of political solidarity. After a ruinous decade of Thatcherism, Griffiths chose to settle in one of the places most severely impacted by deindustrialization. As Clive Bush has written, Griffiths held an 'absolute loyalty to the poor and dispossessed'.³ He spent the 1970s involved in squatting across London, with a couple of spells as a labourer in Germany, and lived for much of the 1980s on a houseboat, until the boat was destroyed in a fire while undergoing repairs.⁴ Many of his papers were lost, but he still managed to complete his PhD in Old English at KCL.

The essay Blair mentions, which I'll return to, is almost certainly *HMP: Revising Prison*, a pamphlet issued by Griffiths in 1993 through his own Amra imprint. *HMP: Revising Prison* isn't so much about 'the difficulties of prison life' as it is a careful argument about abolishing the whole judicial system. Blair was then Shadow Home Secretary, working to move the Labour Party to the right on questions of law and order.⁵ The first time I read his letter to Griffiths, in the Bill Griffiths Collection at Brunel University, it almost felt like a joke. The thought of Tony Blair holding a comb-bound copy of an Amra publication, with a hand-drawn cover, promising to study it closely, is laughable and improbable. I could only conceive of it as an act of futile defiance, the DIY activist text designed to offend the slick rising star of New Labour. But the papers at Brunel contain correspondence with several other Members of Parliament. After Blair became leader of the Labour Party in 1994, Griffiths started writing to his successor Jack Straw. There are exchanges with the British Medical Association about their policies concerning care and medication in prison; petitions to the European Parliament; and numerous letters to the editors of newspapers. Griffiths was an active campaigner, intervening both on behalf of individual prisoners and in protest at the conditions of British jails as a whole.

The intensity of Griffiths' activity in the early 1990s had a personal element. His friend Delvan, whom he'd met in Seaham, spent time incarcerated at HMP Wandsworth, London, and at HMP Highpoint in Suffolk. Griffiths collaborated with him on at least four books: *Review of Brian Greenaway & Notes from Delvan*; *Delvan's Book*; *Star Fish Jail*; and *Seventy-Six Day Wanno, Mississippi and Highpoint Journal*. Each of these works relies on Delvan's account of racist police harassment, judicial procedure, and prison.⁶ The content of *Seventy-Six Day Wanno* includes reproductions of letters that are, in their original form, held in the Brunel papers. But within the archive, the access to these letters is restricted due to data protection laws. In the poem these laws don't apply, and in this way I want to think of the poetry as alchemical, only the metaphor doesn't hold. If this is a labyrinth, then I think I can only find my way by the lighting of archives: the dry overheads, or the more intimate lamps of the library. Or I think of the light in the flat where I live, just behind the Crown Court, and where I am in relation to the document, observing its circulations. In an

interview with Will Rowe, Griffiths calls his poems about prison 'evidence' poems.⁷ What kind of evidence is poetry? What does the experience of prison do to a poem? To answer these questions we need some history.

The first poem in the first volume of Griffiths' *Collected Poems* – unpublished in his lifetime but preserved on a floppy disc of collected works compiled by the poet in 1991 – is called 'Apology'. It is a character sketch of one Barnaby Falk:

Barnaby Falk was born into a more liberal age, that
Gave, capable of choosing, opportunity to follow this or change at
A better course for money, position.
(CP1, 13)

The gradient of rhyme in this opening passage (age/gave/change) is loosely maintained over the rest of the forty lines. We learn that Barnaby rides 'a bike whose gears break,/stick in top and take/more effort than a hill is actually worth'. He works a little in a garage, and when the pubs are shut he wanders the roads, 'drinking down whisky, joyful'. In its cadence and in its portrayal of working life, the poem is reminiscent of the early work of Edward Dorn. In the interview with Rowe, Griffiths states that his early models were 'Hopkins, Keats, [Michael] McClure', for their 'sense and sound balance', and that his aim was to find a poetry 'that would cover modern fairly dangerous and fraught themes'.⁸ In this first surviving poem there is almost no danger at all. It's only in the closing lines, as Barnaby sleeps off his whisky down the lane, that Griffiths speculates:

I wonder which first the day–
Light or police will send him off. Happy
In any ending anyway, Barnaby.

The police don't seem to threaten Barnaby's happiness or trespass the poet's distant affection for his subject. But from this point onwards, the police will never leave the poet's peripheral vision.⁹

Two sequences that Griffiths wrote in the 1970s, *Cycles* and *War W/Windsor*, deal more directly with the violence of the state apparatus. They are justly celebrated as some of the great achievements of the so-called British Poetry Revival. Published in various configurations and batches, mainly by Griffiths' Pirate Press imprint, the language of both remains radically fresh. Drawn from slang, thieves' cant, Romany, ballads, and news reports, Griffiths makes his way in a compressed sprung rhythm. Description turns suddenly to declaration; snatches of talk transform into argument; song breaks out and goes silent. His concision can be brilliant, as in the two-line summary of state power and sovereignty from one of the warm-up poems to *Cycles*: 'watched the queen tell a cop break my nose/and the queen told the cops I was an animal.' (CP1, 48).¹⁰ Though the poems are sometimes obscure and secretive, this laconic edge, with its strange emotional quality, keeps them open. Sometimes, especially reading the three-volume *Collected*, Griffiths seems to drift into distracted eclecticism. But even then the attention is generous, and the possibility of distillation and generative association remains.

Other than a couple of broadsides, Griffiths first appeared in print in the Autumn 1972 edition of *Poetry Review*. Though he doesn't quite sound like anything else in the magazine at that point, there are commonalities with the other contributors: the West Indian speech rhythms of James Berry; the transcription experiments of David Antin; the minimalist wordplay of Aram Saroyan. He shares political affinities with Robert Duncan, Jack Hirschman, and Tom Pickard. Griffiths became embedded in the London experimental poetry scene of the 1970s, working in the printshop of the National Poetry Centre and contributing to many little magazines. During the radical period of the Poetry Society, his commitment to experimentation involved concrete poems, collaborative sound performances, and multi-voice texts.¹¹ In critical accounts and reminiscences, Griffiths often stands in for something like the spirit of the age. To describe his appearance – tattooed knuckles, motorbike gear, later a uniform of shellsuits – is by now a critical commonplace. Griffiths represents a way of life, and a way of living poetry against the academy, against institutions, against celebrity and complacency. Iain Sinclair, in *Hackney, That Rose Red Empire* calls Griffiths, 'the real thing, that human catastrophe called poet'.¹² But in this way, the poet becomes an

institution or a hero, or a formula. Or at least that's the risk. The antagonisms of the wider social context recede from view.

January 1972 saw the beginning of a wave of protests in British prisons, which culminated in a national strike on August 4th involving thirty institutions and more than 10,000 prisoners. Though there had been riots and disturbances before, this was part of a broader pattern of unrest. The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) began a six-week strike in January, a dispute which would lead to the collapse of Edward Heath's Conservative government in 1974, and lay the ground for Thatcher's war with the miners in 1984–85. Between May and December the Angry Brigade prosecutions took place, tried by Justice Melford Stevenson, who Griffiths would later satirise.¹³ In Derry, Northern Ireland, British soldiers killed thirteen people during a civil rights demonstration on January 30th. The policy of internment without trial continued, and many Irish Republicans were imprisoned in English jails.¹⁴

The protests in England were both spontaneous and co-ordinated, and the demands of the prisoners were delivered to the press and to the Home Office by a new organization: Preservation of the Rights of Prisoners (PROP).¹⁵ PROP tried to establish a union for prisoners, taking inspiration from Californian prison struggles, especially the strike at Folsom in 1970, and the Attica uprising of 1971.¹⁶ In a five-point statement from 1973, the London chapter of PROP explain that while they support 'alternative policies more constructive than imprisonment', they demand in the short-term a programme of maximum rights for prisoners. These rights are set out in a list of 24 demands, relating to legal representation, education, visits, voting, parole and other elements of prison life. Full membership of PROP was reserved for 'any person who is or has been an inmate of any detention centre, remand centre, approved school, Borstal prison, or other penal establishment.'¹⁷ Only full members were entitled to vote and hold official positions, which meant that – in theory – PROP was led by those with first-hand knowledge of incarceration. Griffiths himself spent some nights on remand at Brixton prison in 1971, suggesting in an interview that the experience left him 'determined never to write the sort of poem that is simply entertaining, that helps people to carry on enjoying the world as it is'.¹⁸

The protests of 1972 ended one by one. The Prison Officers Association (POA) initiated a 'get tough' policy in retribution, restricting visits, classes, and entertainment. After further disturbances at Arbury and Dartmoor in late August and early September, the POA met with the Home Secretary Robert Carr, who had consistently refused to recognise PROP. The Prison Officers were given permission to hand out further punishment to 1700 men, including long stretches in solitary confinement and the loss of as much as two years' remission. While I have found no evidence Griffiths was involved in these events or in PROP, this is the atmosphere in which his first poems were published. When extracts from 'Cycles on Dover Borstal', 'Terzetto: Brixton Prison', and 'To Johnny Prez' appeared in *Poetry Review* in Autumn 1972, the memory of the most extensive prison demonstrations in British history would have been fresh in the reader's mind.

Following the setbacks in the protests, and a split within PROP itself (between the Hull and London factions), some of the most interesting work the organization undertook was in publishing accounts of prison by prisoners. The first major example was Brian Stratton's *Who Guards the Guards?* (1973) which records the systematic brutality which led to the riot at Parkhurst Prison on the Isle of Wight in October 1969.¹⁹ The second, *Don't Mark His Face: Hull Prison Riot 1976* (1976) features testimony and analysis smuggled out of various prisons in the aftermath of a major disturbance at Hull.²⁰ Another dozen pamphlets covering topical issues and controversies were issued between 1973 and 1974. These books are still powerful. This isn't only because of the violence they recount; in general, these works avoid sensationalism and never luxuriate in brutality. It's still rare to hear the voice of prisoners at any length, and it's rarer still to hear them unedited and in a context of their own making. I want to suggest that Griffiths shared at least one aim with PROP: he wanted to amplify the prisoner, to make the prisoner heard over what one poem calls the 'grave police music' of the penal system ('Cycle Two (Dover Borstal)', *CP1*, 69).

Of course, Griffiths' loyalty to aesthetic experimentation places him at some distance from the documentary accounts of prison riots and investigative reports published by PROP. The poems in *Cycles* are concerned with perception, and the agitated dynamic of control and release. The opening of 'Cycle Three: H.M. Prison Brixton' is typical:

To the sickish kids
 nothing. all the epileptics,
 taken like no monster swans

prison
 like houses
 going in a sort of late dog
 watching, hey master –
 all built,
 blocks, octagons
 (CP1, p. 70)

This poetry poses serious challenges to interpretation. We can understand the ‘sickish kids’ to be the inmates, both subject to the socio-psychological category of ‘deviancy’, and the physical side effects of imprisonment. They receive ‘nothing’, no treatment or alleviation for their suffering. The 1973 PROP pamphlet *The Scandal of British Prisons* focuses on the maltreatment of epileptics in Canterbury, Stafford, and Strangeways, and it’s possible Griffiths is thinking of this issue. But Griffiths makes a negative comparison with ‘monster swans’: I imagine the swan spreading its wings, hard to control and to capture. The comparison is ironic because swans come under royal protection while the prisoner detained at her majesty’s pleasure is in these circumstances more like a dog, tail between legs.²¹ This situation, Griffiths reminds us, is ‘all built’: the prison is not natural, but can and should be changed.

In this respect, Griffiths’ work could be read alongside several other sequences in the British experimental tradition that deal with the law. A provisional list would include Barry MacSweeney’s *Jury Vet*, written between 1979 and 1981, a delirious and violent engagement with Official Secrets Acts trials and the beginnings of Thatcherism; Eric Mottram’s *Legal Poems* (1986) and Maggie O’Sullivan’s *her/story: eye* (1994–99), which deal in different ways with internment and the Hunger Strikes at Long Kesh in Northern Ireland; Geraldine Monk’s *Interregnum* (1994), a treatment of witch trials in early modern England punctuated by ‘Gaol Songs’; Tom Pickard’s reconstruction of the story of a border outlaw and folk hero, *The Ballad*

of *Jamie Allan* (2007); and Linton Kwesi Johnson's many poems chronicling police harassment in Brixton and New Cross.

But Griffiths brought his prison poems to a temporary halt in 1978, in a work of desolate prose called *An Account of the End*. Published by Richard Tabor's Lobby Press, *An Account of the End* begins by narrating a series of arrests and the disintegration of the relationships of the poet's closest friends. Part Five turns to the deaths of men in prison and police custody:

It is specific: Stephen Smith hanged himself in a punishment cell in Wormwood Scrubs on the 8th August 1974 following a programme of mistreatment including beatings, having his glasses smashed and so on, alleged that is by two hundred prisoners whose petition was smuggled out and then ignored.²²

In December 1977, Griffiths had written to Eric Mottram asking him for a character reference in the hope that he could access the inquest report about the death of Michael Dell, who drowned while attempting to escape a Borstal in Cambridgeshire.²³ The application was evidently unsuccessful, and Dell's name slips through the cracks, lost to the state records and reports in the local newspaper. In *An Account of the End*, Griffiths strips his work of invention, soberly judging his poetry against the traces these bodies leave behind. In one bitterly sarcastic passage he reflects both on the kinds of material I have been drawing on throughout this essay and on the position of the avant-garde poetry culture:

I take a look back through all the leaflets of the early 70's. They are so fierce and so straight [...] Now it's just a matter of pointing the worst law-breakers out and all will go well. There's a better state network too covering the arts for the whole country. If I'm favoured they may even print this for me, as there is no way I can afford it.

The collapse of his faction's involvement in the Poetry Society brought about a crisis in Griffiths' writing. Commenting self-reflexively on his listing of the dead, Griffiths

writes, 'The plain compilation is a danger.' But the work of poetry is suspended until 'its good rhythms get to mean more than every aeon-rub and tear of instituted obliteration'. At this point the thread goes slack. Though the law continues as a theme throughout his writing in the 1980s, especially seen through the work of Boethius, the prison itself falls away.

On Sunday April 1st, 1990, prisoners staged a protest in the chapel of Strangeways Prison, Manchester. After the sermon they refused to leave, and as the anger mounted the Prison Officers began to evacuate the premises. After seizing keys from a guard, prisoners began unlocking the cells and quickly took control of the jail. The resulting siege and rooftop protest lasted 25 days.²⁴ As in 1972, the disturbances spread to other prisons and came at a time of national unrest. On March 31st in central London the Poll Tax riots had forced the final defeat of Thatcher's government, leading to her resignation in November. Soon after, the UK signed the Maastricht Treaty, integrating economic and fiscal policy with the European Union, and preparing the ground for EU conventions on Human Rights and justice. This is the context in which Griffiths returned to writing directly about prison.

The essay Griffiths sent Tony Blair in 1993, *HMP: Revising Prison*, begins with the critique of a television programme about HMP Wandsworth. Though Griffiths doesn't name the film, it was a three-part series entitled *Turning the Screws* directed by the influential documentary maker and criminologist Roger Graef. Graef came to prominence in the 1980s with a series of films about police and policing. The focus of the Wandsworth documentary is on an industrial dispute between the Prison Officers Association (POA) and the Home Office. In 1989, a new shift system had been introduced, leading to a ten-day strike by the POA, during which the Metropolitan Police were brought in to control the prison. The dispute was never completely resolved, and following the Strangeways uprising, the POA were concerned about the conditions for prisoner association, the time spent by inmates outside of their cells. In the preface to *Star Fish Jail*, written at the same time as *HMP: Revising Prison*, Griffiths complains that under the pretence of neutrality, the film reproduces:

[A] pre-established mythology of a three-tier society: a decision-making elite, a hard-working and dedicated corps of middle-men, and a substratum composed of characterless, nameless beings who inexplicably keep falling down stairs.²⁵

This is an accurate description. The narrative of *Turning the Screws* revolves largely around the chain-smoking union rep and the reforming Prison Governor, who occasionally quotes Macbeth. Each hour-long episode removes us further from the prison, until the final hearing at the Home Office where a repeat of the 1989 strike is averted. Though Griffiths notes in *HMP: Revising Prison* that there are two moments where the façade slips and we are presented with shots of a wounded prisoner and an officer disciplining an inmate, these are at best light pricks of conscience. The protagonists are the Officers; the antagonists are the management: the prisoners make little impression.

Where Graef starts from the standpoint of authority, Griffiths sides only and always with the prisoners.²⁶ In *HMP: Revising Prison* his argument moves both outwards and inwards, from solitary confinement and institutional violence to Britain's imperial past. The regime of the prison comes to rest as the keystone of the system, the point at which the State's dynamic of internal suppression and external aggression is forged and sustained. As he says: 'The use of prison to try and re-establish past ideals of submission and control seems more a model of extinction than any way forward.' Griffiths arrives at this conclusion by way of the immediate materials at hand: television, newspapers, and his own experiences. While he was certainly familiar with Foucault and other sociological studies, he does not rely on theory for his claims. His prose is restrained, as it is in other contemporary essays such as *In Rebuttal of the Guardian: On the Role of Solitary Confinement in British Prisons – Call for an Inquiry* (1994) and *Some Notes on the Metropolitan Police, London: With Some Footnotes on the Magistrates' Courts* (1994). He avoids the rhetoric of pathos, preferring instead to present his case with gentle irony. In what may be his first published essay, *A Note on Democracy* (1974), he leaves a generous margin for notes and supplies a return address for feedback and improvement.

But it's possible that the essay Tony Blair promised to study closely wasn't an essay at all. The two texts written in collaboration with Delvan are hybrid works: both *Star Fish Jail* and *Seventy-Six Day Wanno* smuggle poetry in the guise of prose, letters and diaries in the guise of poems and spoken testimony shaped by hand. A casual glance would hardly register the complexity.

Seventy-Six Day Wanno, Mississippi and Highpoint Journal – to give its full title – begins on April 23 1993. The previous day, the teenager Stephen Lawrence had been murdered by a racist gang at a bus stop in South London. The next day the Provisional IRA would bomb Bishopsgate. Neither event is mentioned in the text, which details Griffiths' friendship with the young prisoner, Delvan.²⁷ The book is laid out as an A4 landscape, split into two even columns. On the left-hand side runs Delvan's journal, progressing chronologically, and beginning with his arrival at Wandsworth. He is almost immediately assaulted by prison guards:

I got sentenced to five months today. I am in Wandsworth prison, not the greatest place on earth, have got off to a seemingly bad start. Got a little bit of hassle off a screw for blanking him, when asked if I was ready to get banged up. He was not happy about this, he called four of his mates up to my cell, walked in slapped me across the face three or four times. I had to hold my hands behind my back to stop myself lashing out.²⁸

The incident is retold in more dramatic fashion in *Star Fish Jail*:

He sort of went a bit wild, him: 'You black bastard,' he yells at me,
 'You black shit: you see this whistle?
 All I need is blow on this, see: and there'll be eight of us
 all over you, yes, and: off to the block head-down.'²⁹

The right-hand side of the page is varied. It begins with a letter from Delvan to Bill, and is followed by Bill's reply. These are the letters inaccessible at the archive in Brunel under data protection laws. As the book progresses, short poems from the incidents Delvan reports start to appear. Over the course of his 76-day stretch, Delvan is moved to Highpoint Prison, and we read about the bureaucratic obstacles this

creates: his visitors, who aren't informed of the move, turn up at a prison where he is no longer held; his money and other personal belongings aren't transferred with him; he has trouble getting help with his housing benefit forms. Between *76-Day Wanno* and *Star Fish Jail* we are presented with a racist, violent, petty institution, and a portrait of survival within its confines.

Griffiths is sensitive to the special status of documents within the prison system. Unlike Graef, he makes the material conditions and terms of the book's composition absolutely clear. In one passage, after Delvan has been transferred to Highpoint, we learn about the letters:

Letters are safe.
They are sealed, taken to Cambridge and posted.
It's better and quicker than Wanno.
The letters come in,
and if there's one for you,
your names posted on a noticeboard so
you know to go
and collect it.³⁰

There is a strange tenderness to the poems. Though the content is drawn from Delvan's correspondence and conversation, the quotations aren't exact. Griffiths instead imitates his friend's voice, finding in it a weakened poetry. The prison routine is still too demeaning for the 'good rhythms' he put aside in *Account of the End*, the full music of *Cycles* or *War W/Windsor*. Instead, the march back-and-forth from the cell is marked by tired end-rhymes, 'Wanno', 'so', 'go'. Where the earlier sequences placed the burden of interpretation on the reader, here Griffiths emphasizes the formal and structural devices of his writing. He makes the process of composition visible.

There is, however, one major exception: *76-Day Wanno* was published in two different variations, and only one features the poems. The editions are otherwise identical. It seems likely to me that the poems – later made into a longer standalone sequence called 'How Highpoint is Better Than Wandsworth' – were written to obscure the letters Bill sent to Delvan. These letters talk about a separate legal case

under review in the Magistrates' Court: they are, perhaps, the wrong kind of evidence. The poems, then, are practical, necessary, tactical. Griffiths is a resourceful poet, and midway through *76-Day Wanno* he explains to Delvan that he's working on another sequence, which will be issued in a signed limited edition to raise funds for the outstanding Magistrates' fine. This is *Star Fish Jail*, issued in forty copies as 'a gesture of support from the printing world'. A few pages later we learn that the book has raised £290.18. With full disclosure, Griffiths tells Delvan and tells his reader that the 18 pence was 'someone paying for a stamp'. He describes the book as 'my only successful publication ever.'

The text of *Star Fish Jail* is in two parts, telling the story of Delvan's imprisonment, his childhood and adolescence. It is a work of sustained anger, analysis and poetic invention, and deserves to be more widely known. It presents a kind of prison writing that recalls the political engagement of the 1970s and it fuses documentary engagement with poetic experimentation in a tradition that stretches back to Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*. At the highest points of intensity, the division between Bill and Delvan disappears, leaving the poem to speak with painful clarity:

Is it act? drama? : It's me causing it all?
 and only I move? : yet you have not felt the weight of this ziggurat,
 seen the slant : heard the broad cattle-groans,
 been picked out : or bred to
 or congratulated : or admired
 for this grade of de-manning: this culture of sovereign shit :
 the golden blood,
 the complete overturning : that sets your taboos safe, outside,
 keeps that normality self-placed : this is ritual.
 Meaningless here : to make sense there.

(CP3, p. 199)

The barbarity of the prison system, its crushing waste of human life, is intolerable. I write this five miles away from Wandsworth Prison, with the windows open,

daylight pouring through the trees. The poem makes it impossible for me to forget the existence of the people incarcerated there. In the 12 months leading up to March 2017 there were 344 deaths in prison custody: 113 self-inflicted fatalities; 199 deaths due to natural causes; 3 apparent homicides; and 29 other deaths, 24 of which are 'awaiting confirmation' prior to being classified'.³¹ In March 2016, the BBC broadcast another documentary about Wandsworth, and though it showed the chaos of the prison rife with violence and drugs, the prisoners remained – as in 1992 – a 'substratum composed of characterless, nameless beings'.

Griffiths' work gives character, gives names, gives voices to the cold statistics of punishment and death at the hands of the State. In the middle of *76-Day Wanno* there's a moment that catches my breath every time I read it:

Come on, let me tell you
the effect of the radios.
Suppose several were all tuned in the same,
one same song playing on them
and you stood in the doorway
for a listen.
Well, that was the whole music roll
about the landing
a proud sound,
something tinny and from wherever the bass
and running round and round the ears
back.³²

The prisoners' radio is a weak and precarious instrument: but this is an image of solidarity, co-operation, and collective life. The passive receiver can be transformed through collaboration into a device for broadcast. Together, the tinny amplifiers make the bass appear, make the proud sound, the prisoners themselves heard along the landing and the doorway into the world. I started by describing the sheer quantity of work Griffiths produced as like a labyrinth; but maybe this is a better image. Each sequence like a radio, ready to be used.

Notes

- ¹ Bill Griffiths, 'Terzetto', *Collected Earlier Poems: 1966–1980* (Hastings: Reality Street, 2010), p. 37. Further references will be given in the text as *CP1*, with page numbers following.
- ² Bill Griffiths Collection, Brunel University Library Special Collections, London. BG 16/1/5. Technically speaking, the letter is typed and signed on Blair's behalf by his secretary.
- ³ Clive Bush, *Out of Dissent: A Study of Five Contemporary British Poets* (London: Talus, 1997), p. 212. Bush's chapter on Griffiths remains the best introduction to his work.
- ⁴ The voyages of the boat, and his life on the waterways of South England are recorded in *The Book of the Boat* (London: Writers Forum, 1988). Collected in *Collected Poems & Sequences: 1981–1991* (Hastings: Reality Street, 2014), pp. 73–102. For a recent commentary on this text, see Robert Sheppard, *The Meaning of Form in Contemporary Innovative Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 175–181.
- ⁵ In an article for the *New Statesman* in January 1993 he'd first tried out his famous slogan: 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime.' Tony Blair, 'Why Crime is a Socialist Issue', *New Statesman and Society* 29 January 1993, pp. 27–28.
- ⁶ The ethical question of Griffiths' use of prisoner testimony can only be touched on here. For an extensive critique of Foucault's comparable work in Group d'Information sur les Prisons, see Cecile Brich, 'The Groupe d'information sur les prisons: The voice of the prisoners? Or Foucault's?', *Foucault Studies*, No. 5 (2008), pp. 26–47.
- ⁷ 'Interview with Will Rowe', *Salt Companion to Bill Griffiths* (Cambridge: Salt, 2007), pp. 171–196 (193).
- ⁸ 'Interview with Will Rowe', p. 171.
- ⁹ It seems apt to mention here the irony that Brian Bransom Griffiths chose to name himself 'Bill'. In English, 'the old Bill' is a colloquial term for the police.
- ¹⁰ In his obituary, Nicholas Johnson notes: 'His exhibitions of local history in Seaham town hall attracted national attention, and, in 2002, the Queen visited one of his displays. But when the poet Ian Hamilton Finlay was appointed CBE the same year Griffiths declared that there were built-in repellants in his poetry to prevent similar nominations.' Nicholas Johnson, 'Bill Griffiths – Obituary', *The Independent*, Wednesday 19 September 2007. Online: <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/bill-griffiths-402904.html>>.
- ¹¹ See Paula Claire, 'Bill Griffiths: A Severe Case of Hypergraphia', in *The Salt Companion to Bill Griffiths*, pp. 37–50.
- ¹² Iain Sinclair, *Hackney, That Rose Red Empire* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009).
- ¹³ In 'The Praise Song of Justice Melford Stevenson', *CP1*, p. 181. The poem dates from 1977.
- ¹⁴ See Ruán O'Donnell, *Special Category: The IRA In English Prisons*, 2 vols (Sallins: Irish Academic Press, 2015).
- ¹⁵ The most extensive account of the formation of PROP – which I rely on here – is in Mike Fitzgerald, *Prisoners in Revolt* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977). Fitzgerald, a founder member of the group, who later became Vice-Chancellor of Thames Valley University, tends to emphasize the role played by PROP in the protests. For a measured critique of PROP, its methods and legacy, see the unsigned article 'Long Hot Summer of '72', in *Taking Liberties*, May 1998.
- ¹⁶ See Griffiths' late poem 'The Attica Retribution', collected in *The Lion Man & Others* (London: Veer, 2008).
- ¹⁷ From a single sheet document, 'Statement by London Group of PROP/Prisoners' Charter', undated, c. 1973. Collection of the author.
- ¹⁸ Interview with Bridget Penney and Paul Holman, September 14 1993. Online: <http://www.invisible-books.co.uk/?page_id=341>.
- ¹⁹ Brian Stratton, *Who Guards the Guards?* (London: Prop, 1973). The version I have seen, a slim red paperback, is described as the third edition, printed at the War on Want building on Caledonian Road, London. It gives thanks to the Stranglers, and the students of Oxford Polytechnic for helping to fund the publication.

- ²⁰ PROP, *Don't Mark His Face: Hull Prison Riot 1976* (London: PROP, 1976). This volume contains a contribution from Jake Prescott, convicted in 1971 as a member of the Angry Brigade.
- ²¹ Alan Halsey notes: 'Animals clearly fascinate Griffiths and appear in many of his poems. They are 'outlaws' without being formally outlawed; they live outside human jurisdiction, although human jurisdiction does affect their lives and they have no choice in the matter. They live in human consciousness and at the same time far beyond it; they seem to us deeply emblematic but we suppose they inhabit a world without emblems.' Alan Halsey, 'Pirate Press: A Bibliographical Excursion', *The Salt Companion to Bill Griffiths*, pp. 55–71 (60–61).
- ²² Bill Griffiths, *An Account of the End* (Cambridge: Lobby Press, 1978), n.p. This passage recalls the closing lines of Gilles Deleuze's preface to a collection of letters by the prisoner 'H.M.', who hanged himself: 'A specific number of people are directly and personally responsible for the death of H.M.' Deleuze, 'H.M.'s Letters', in *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1954–1974*, ed. by David Lapoujade, trans. by Mike Taormina (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2004). Griffiths also mentions the attempted suicide of George Ince. Ince, who was tried by Judge Melford Stevenson, was convicted based solely on the visual identification of four witnesses. He was later acquitted. See the report by JAIL: Martin Walker and Bernadette Brittain, *Identification Evidence: Practices and Malpractices* (London: Jail, 1978), pp. 4–5.
- ²³ Eric Mottram Collection, King's College London. Mottram: 5/100/1–36.
- ²⁴ The most extensive account of the events can be found in Nicki Jameson and Eric Allison, *Strangeways 1990: A Serious Disturbance* (London: Larkin Publications, 1995).
- ²⁵ Bill Griffiths, *Star Fish Jail* (Seaham: Amra Imprint, 1993). There are many variances to this edition, some of which are recorded by Alan Halsey in *CP3*, pp. 513–14.
- ²⁶ Graef is also the author of two books of documentary narrative. The first, *Talking Blues: The Police in their Own Words* (London: Collins Harvill, 1989) is an 'emotional mosaic' of British and Northern Irish police officers (p. 11). The second, *Living Dangerously* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), features interviews with young offenders on an 'extreme probation' course in South London. While he expresses sympathy with his young subjects, and offers them material assistance, his position is always that of the liberal reformer. As Foucault argues: 'Prison "reform" is virtually contemporary with the prison itself: it constitutes, as it were, its programme.' Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 234.
- ²⁷ Though Delvan notes at one point that he sits next to an IRA supporter while being transported from Wandsworth to Highpoint.
- ²⁸ Bill Griffiths and D.R. McIntosh, *Seventy-Six Day Wanno, Mississippi and Highpoint Journal* (Seaham: Amra Imprint, 1993), n.p.
- ²⁹ Bill Griffiths, *Star Fish Jail* (Seaham: Amra Imprint, 1993), collected in *CP3*, pp. 191–209 (193).
- ³⁰ As discussed below, the poems only appear in some variants of *Seventy-Six Day Wanno, Mississippi and Highpoint Journal*. They were later published as a sequence in their own right, 'How Highpoint is Better than Wandsworth', *CP3*, pp. 465–472 (467).
- ³¹ Ministry of Justice, Safety in Custody Statistic Bulletin for England and Wales, online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/611187/safety-in-custody-statistics-q4-2016.pdf> The statistics include Immigration Removal Centres operated by Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, but not those centres currently operated by private contractors such as Serco.
- ³² *CP3*, p. 469.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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